

This was the final project for the Ethnomusicology 20C (Musical Cultures of the World: Asia) course, taught by Professor Katherine In-Young Lee in Fall 2021 at UCLA. Students worked in groups to research and conduct an oral history with one of seven Asian and Asian American musicians. Each of the narrators are highly esteemed musicians with long professional careers in music performance. They also serve as important liaisons between their home countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the United States.

Profile of I Nyoman Wenten

I Nyoman Wenten is one of Bali's most accomplished dancers and musicians and is celebrated as a teacher and performer. He is known not only for his work in traditional Indonesian music and dance, but also for his creative east-west fusion of composition and performance work.

Dr. Wenten complemented his traditional training with formal study, graduating first from Bali's Conservatory of Music (Kokar), then later from the National Music and Dance Academy in Yogyakarta, Java. He received a Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology from UCLA and is currently an Ethnomusicology professor and a director of the Music of Bali Ensemble at the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music.

Dr. Wenten has collaborated with numerous musicians and composers, including Morton Subotnick, Elaine Barkin, Robert Kyr, George Lewis, Dr. L. Subramaniam, Adam Rudolf and Bill Alves, and also with dancers including Eko Supriyanto, S. Maridi, B. Suharto, Sardono W. Kusumo and Marion Scott, artistic director and choreographer of Spirit Dances. Wenten has toured Europe, Asia, Australia, and North and South America, giving lecture demonstrations and workshops as well as performances. He produced and served as musical consultant for a highly regarded series of CD recordings of gamelan music released by CMP Records, Germany.

Oral History Interview Transcript: I Nyoman Wenten

Colin Gotschall:

Thank you for joining us today, my name is Colin Gotschall and I'm joined by Michael Alvarado and Lorenzo Siciliano. We are students of Professor Katherine Lee's course Ethnomusicology 20C, Music Cultures of the World: Asia. We will be conducting the interview of Dr. I Nyoman Wenten, Dr. Wenten is the director of the Music of Bali Ensemble here at UCLA. This interview is being recorded via Zoom at 10:00am Pacific Standard Time in Los Angeles California and will be deposited and available for public access via the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive and archive.org. So without further ado, Pak Wenten thank you for joining us today. We appreciate getting the opportunity to speak with you.

I Nyoman Wenten:

My pleasure, nice to meet you this morning.

Group:

Yeah good morning

Colin Gotschall:

So to get started we thought it would be good if you could just give us a brief introduction about your life, your musical journey, and how you grew up and just kinda elaborate on how you got to where you are today.

I Nyoman Wenten:

Wonderful, thank you for having me in this interview, oral tradition here. I...actually I was born in a small village in Bali so called.... my village is called Sading, “s” “a” “d” “i” “n” “g.” Not too far from the capital of Bali, Denpasar. I was born there and... my village is about thirteen different “banjar,” thirteen different communities, and each “banjar” consists about...seventy five different families. It's a small village but we do have very much active gamelan and dance, and I was born....and be the 6th generation of family of artists. My grandfather was a puppeteer and dancer and he told me his grandfather was a dancer/puppeteer already, so this is almost sixth generation from myself so...unfortunately when I was born about two years of my age my mom passed away and actually then my grandfather and my father take care of me and then direct me when I went to school, and then after school this my most activities is to play gamelan and study dance. That's what I began yes, so then I started...you know started to learn gamelan in my village, most of the time from my father and my grandfather and then when I finish grade school I go to Denpasar to study, in Denpasar this not too far from my village but maybe six mile..five mile from my village, and I continue to study music and dance, my grandfather own Gamelan instruments and I study at home and also my grandfather find me a teacher and I go to a banjar, the community hall...where we have a gamelan also there, so we just tried to banging the key, try to learn the technique and the old musicians come and try to... help me improve my technique. And after that, I move on to my school... I went to the Conservatory of Music and Dance also in Denpasar, and that was in 1960..62, then I had opportunity to perform when I was starting over seven years old to many different temple festival, or temple ceremony around my village also outside my village and when I was...in high school performing art, they call KOKAR Conservatory of Karawitan. Karawitan means music and also study puppetry and dance. I got the opportunity to be a member of residential mission culture, to promote our culture to different countries. To Europe, to Asia mainly, so when I was 17, I joined...this group of about 85 musician and dancer from many part of Indonesia, mainly from Central Java, West Java, Sumatra, the island of Sumatra, the island of Kalimantan. It's about 85 of us traveled to many different parts of the world, most of the country in Asia and also Middle East yes, so...we...were able to perform for the head of the state like, we went to China to perform for the president of China, Mao Zedong at that time and the prime minister Zhou Enlai, so...then we went to North Korea to perform for Kim Il-Sung, the grandfather of this president now, the kaiser [Emperor] Hirohito in Japan, and also we went to Middle East to Iran to perform for..that time is...Iran before Khomeini actually, yes then we went to also...to the country...Thailand, so that is...I continue my study after that, I went to ...after I graduated from Denpasar, the high school performing art in Denpasar, I went to study in Yogyakarta Central Java, so that is the college called Asti, “A” “S” “T” “I.” This national academy of music and dance in Central Java, that is my first time actually study outside Bali, so that is... when I went there around 1965, 1965. So that is the beginning of my career as music and dance, be able to teach in that school after that and then... I'm very fortunate...A professor from University of Wesleyan...he became a professor at CalArts and also became a professor at UCLA, Dr. Brown, Dr. Robert Brown

discover me in Bali and brought me here with my father-in-law, who was very famous composer by the name of Pak Tjokro [K.R.T. Wasitodipuro], the nickname Pak Tjokro,...the most famous ethnomusicology professor Dr. Hood, who actually open the ethnomusicology department at UCLA, study with my father-in-law Pak Tjokro, and... he tried to bring him here but finally he came around 1972 with me and he also had teach, he taught at UCLA for a couple years, and mainly at CalArts and also many different University around ...the US, so both of us travel around to open many different new gamelan program, like for example in Canada, Simon Fraser University, and also we..I taught at UBC and we brought the gamelan to Wisconsin, San Jose State, San Francisco State, and also to Tallahassee, Florida State University, San Diego, SDSU, also University of California in San Diego, so but a few different gamelan program we've been involved with for many different years we've...been here yes. Ok this the beginning of my introduction so...if you have any question, comment...

Colin Gotschall:

Yes, thank you so much, that is amazing. I'm actually curious, so what was the experience like performing in front of Mao and Kim Il-Sung, I remember in your... film *Bali: Beats of Paradise*, you kinda touched on that in the beginning of the film and you mentioned how it was kinda dangerous at the time to be performing in front of them so what was that experience like?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Um well it's very...excited for me, because I was very young, and you know in our country, starting the politically uncertain, but...share the communist school but...there's just another party. Quite a bit of unsettle in our political status in Indonesia at that time, so they...our first president still wanted to promote our country because we just had independence, 1945 so it's about 20...years before the very difficult situation, what's so called communist coup in Indonesia, who knows what was happen at that time yeah, but we still promote our culture to different country so thats its...a kinda difficult time for the artists... for me too especially, I worry about people's jealousy, oh you came to communist country must be you communists and so forth, so there's this very dangerous sentiment, you can get killed easily at that time, that is I mean dangerous because quite a few people... you know...their lives were lost. Hundred-hundred thousand maybe a million people died during that time. So uh, and for me, perform in front of dignitaries, the head of the state like very famous, Kim Il-sung, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, King Norodom Sihanouk from Cambodia, I'm so, I can't even tell how excited I was that time, you know the first time I went abroad with so many artists and to perform and actually witness they are there in front of you so you feel so incredible, exciting and the same time you are nervous the same time, yea. But we went, each time we tour abroad maybe two months and one month and so forth so... We travel around the city not only perform for the head of the state but also for the people of all different cities. Like, we went to Beijing, went to Shanghai, Cologne, all different cities where we went to perform yes. Yea.

Colin Gotschall:

Wow that's very amazing, awesome. So my next question is since you came from a long lineage of artists and musicians, what is kind of the general perception of going into music and art and dance and pursuing that, like what is the perception of that in Bali. Is it thought of as kind of like a career choice or is it more an aspect of culture that a lot of people and kind of everyone in Bali

is able to participate in outside of their other professions and things they have going on in their daily lives?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes, very great question and I encounter question like this quite a few time. What drive you to study music and dance and general speaking actually, to be able to volunteer your time. Because music and dance is part of our fabric life every day, so the music and dance involve with many different type of ceremony. They call Panca Yadnya ritual ceremony. Panca means five. Yadnya means ritual ceremony. So number one for example: Dewa Yadnya, so ritual ceremony geared to entertain the spirit, the God, so this part of the ritual ceremony in the temple so they call Dewa Yadnya. So, we need all different type of gamelan, all different, what do you call different level of you know expertise, because we not judge them because we volunteer, we perform in a temple and not for the audience but for the great spirit, we believe in recite oh come down during the ceremony in the temple. So like me, myself when I was study I don't thinking about becoming a professional musician/dancers, just be socializing with my friends and also be able to volunteer my time when they come the village need you. So basically Balinese people study music, we not gearing for or become a professional musician. Of course later on when we have a school, starting 1960 we have a conservatory of music, but before that when I was very young, born in the village, we don't have yet school to pursue our dream to become good musician or teachers, so we just study in the village for volunteer our time. They call: ngayah is meant volunteer our time for many different ceremony is needed. So after ngayah after perform in the temple we don't get paid, they give us of course they give us food to eat during that time, as many as you want or drink and also I remember my grandfather was a puppeteer. He perform every night and so the day before they perform, the family would invite him to perform for the ceremony, or a birthday decade, or wedding ceremony they give my grandfather a lot of food, all different type of saté, or soup for the entire family to eat or even you never, we cannot eat it all so many food, so this are the payment actually. Through the year my father build a house, never really spend money; people will come and volunteer the time to erect the building, volunteer to carve the house and so forth, so has taken gifts actually. And then of course, slowly, when the tourist industry appear in Bali and then become big in Bali, then some of the musician hired by the hotel, and also a club, so they hire to sublet the income, so they every perform they receive some payment, money. Then, of course in Western world the predicate called professional musician or dancers, but we cannot really still make a living out of them, play just play music and dance, so they have to still have have a core job. Like my grandfather is farming, he's a farmer and also my dad is a temple builder but he also musician and dancer and singer. So, so many combined income to be able to survive. Of course lately, because we have musical academy then we become teacher, become a professor, and be able to support our daily life just by play gamelan, teach and music and dance, and also not only related to institution but also in the village. Like my brother, he came here a couple time to teach in university. He came to UCLA to CalArts, but he mainly stay home and many different club invite him to come to teach the club, and he be able to survive to and not to worry about you know, to have a different type of job, of course their job has also farming, has a farmer yes. So, basically in general speaking we not thinking about becoming a professional musician and dancer, but just to volunteer our time for a different ceremony. Normally, and each village they have a very big temple, three main temple and then each clan have under the temple, you're talking about 100 temple each village. So each temple they have a different type of anniversary, every two hundred ten days, different ceremony in the

temple so they need the music and dance to perform to over the talent to the spirit reside in the temple at that time, yes. Yes, answer your question?

Colin Gotschall:

Absolutely, thank you!

Lorenzo Siciliano:

Yea, since we've already been getting a little more into the technicals of the music, would you mind if we talked a little bit more about specific music questions when you're playing....can you hear me? Hello?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes, could you speak a little bit louder, please?

Lorenzo Siciliano:

Yea, sorry. So since we already started talking about the music a little more in depth, would you mind if we asked some more like technical questions?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes.

Lorenzo Siciliano:

So for example, within this genre of music, does the placement of the gong within the music cycle affect the overall aesthetic of the music and where it goes in any way?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes, very typical of gamelan music, the gong is very important. That is what, let me see, so the gong is two to three different instruments, the gong, big gong they call ageng, a great gong, and medium size gong they call kempur, and then the kemong, smallest hanging gong in the Balinese style of Gamelan, and different island like central Javanese instrumentation, slightly different. But the gong is very important in our music, that is, we in ethnomusicology term we call colotomic phrase divider, so they determine how big the structure the piece, the form of the piece to be playing, you can tell how many beats the gong cycle is. So, they call gendhing alit small gong, the small pieces, alit means small. Gendhing madya is middle sized of pieces and sekar agung is mean great, great piece. You're talking about small pieces is four or eight beat cycle, beginning with the gong and end with the gong. And then bigger than them they call it ketawang form, or ladrang form. In Bali they call gaboran is every 16 or 32, 32 beat cycle. And then, gending, tabuh telu [tabuh 3] in Bali, tabuh pat [tabuh 4], tabuh 6, tabuh 8 it is bigger and bigger. You're talking about, sometimes but 640 beat cycle, one gong. So,

Lorenzo Siciliano:

For every 30 beats, there's one gong that plays?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yeah, one gong, The gong player has to wait. And of course, they don't count it. The drum will

indicate when it has to play because it's so, so long, long, uh uh long I mean long piece, sometime maybe one piece uh 25-minute, one gong. So that is that to become for ritual ceremonial gamelan play in the temple, on and on the gong's not not yet being played for uh maybe 342 beats cycle so. And um, that is a very important, uh imagine you know a long piece, big great piece and the gong is supposed to be the time for a gong to occur to play, the gong is not there. So, you feel kind of you eat without drinking. Yeah, always where's my water? So, a little bit feel bad, you know, upsetting for people. That's why the gong player has to focus or so, you cannot just just relax there. You, you have to know when, when the gong supposed to be played, yeah.

Lorenzo Siciliano:

These beat cycles that are always even beat cycles. There's never like a five or 17, or 29, it's always even?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes, traditional music, usually even even number. Either uh, 32 beat, 64 beat cycle, or bigger and bigger. Uh, they call uh, in Bali "tabuh kutus" it mean, a very big piece in Java "kethuk 4 minggah" eight, "kethuk" eight minggah 16. So are very big piece, a very big piece. Uh similar, Javanese gamelan, Balinese gamelan, we share, we share the tuning system, we share the form. Of course they, they play it differently, the the way the function the gamelan's different. And uh, yes, that, that, is the gong, considered very sacred or so, because when they made the gong, the gong maker, uh, has, to, fasting, maybe a week or so before they, uh, you know, starting to to make a gong. Um, so that's why the gong is so, so, consider very uh, uh, have a spirit in it, because not only one person making the gong, the old days it's 12 different expertise, each of them have a different expert in certain time in the gong making, yes.

Lorenzo Siciliano:

You mentioned that between Bali and Java the gong plays a different role, what's the difference?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Not a different role, the gamelan has a different role. Because we are a different belief in Java, most, most, the people uh believe in uh Islamic faith. In Bali they only Hindu, so the gamelan is part of the Hindu ceremony in Bali. Like I said before, five different type of ceremony uh involve with uh a spirit, a god, involved with high priest, involved with a human cycle, we born until we past this very life. So that's the gamelan always part of that. In Java used to be, uh during the history of uh, in the used to call "Nusantara" now they call Indonesia. So, during the Hindu Buddhism period, Islamic period, European explorer, and the independence. So, the gamelan was all involved in different function. But, Originally, all the same when the Hindu Buddhism, the gamelan is part of the entertain the king, or entertain the spirit, or believing in Bali call "Sang Hyang Widi," the supreme god, yes. So um, depending, the, the, period. Now, most of in Javas people mostly, so the gamelan, most time, certain gamelan play in the mosque. During Ramadan, the Ramadan, or the birthday of Muhammad. They brought special gamelan to the mosque, and they play for two or three weeks there. The Gamelan called Sekaten, so that to let the people know, please come to the mosque, celebrate the uh Muhammad birthday. So, uh, also the gamelan for especially for royal wedding in the palace, for coronation, for wedding ceremony in the village. Uh that is uh, uh, still the gamelan also for ritual ceremony and also for

special only perform for entertainment, yes. Um, Nowadays of course, we do have uh people just being a musician, uh they play just for entertain, people come and pay money to to, see see, them perform and and so forth. So almost like professional musician and dancers here.

Lorenzo Siciliano:

Thank you.

Michael Alvarado:

Hi hi, Professor Wenten, Michael.

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes, Michael

Michael Alvarado:

I wanted to ask you about the Balinese uh kecak style of performance.

I Nyoman Wenten:

Right,

Michael Alvarado:

We watched a video uh in Professor Lee's class. The video we watched it was like maybe a hundred, two-hundred men in the ensemble. And I saw in in your film you know Bali: Beats of Paradise that you did kind of, kinda, like an abbreviated version of the kecak style in front of the Temple.

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes.

Michael Alvarado:

Yeah, so, I am just curious you know of how its origin and its tradition and how it relates to gamelan and Balinese culture.

I Nyoman Wenten:

Wonderful. Wonderful question, thank you, Mike. I began, first, um of why is the kecak became it is now. The original monkey chant, what, what, they don't call it monkey chant, that time. Just a group of singer, accompanied trance dance in the temple. Especially the trance there calls "sanghyang dedari" where young girls before puberty like uh seven or eight years or nine years old girl. Uh, brought her to temple because they're pandemic like for example like now, uh lotta people die, and imagined old days no doctor, no vaccination and so far of people die every day. So it is the, the, village people uh realize the time for conduct the trance dance to drive the evil spirit or the sickness from the village away from the village so they conducted called trance dance "sanghyang dedari." Accompanied by a group of singers a singer maybe ten or fifteen. I'll sing they call "son young" "sanghyang" "gending sanghyang" they call it, especially for accompany this. Sometime, they uh they mimic the sound of the gamelan for example uh the, the, melody of a gamelan "young iria or younger young young young" There's a formula, for example and they sing "sangh yara no not yet have melodies" they have melody also or many

different variation. And slowly, slowly, and a and a people notice it is very wonderful, beautiful song or or chanting they do mimic the gamelan sound or mimic the nature the nature like wind type. Or, so, um that was what that started at beginning and one of the artists from Germany by the name of Walters Spies who lived in Bali at that time during that 1930. So um, occasionally sometime his friend come from Europe to visit him in Bali they want to be entertained their fans. So, he come out with the idea of making different type of a performing art like, like now known as monkey chant. Or they call kecak, kecak, because the sound they produce, chuck, chuck, chuck, chuck, chuck, chuck, chuck, chuck, eechi deepo” Yeah, kecak, so they “older piece” collaborated with other dancer from “new ebute” a lot of the village tell people to come to see this village because lot of uh artist live there, lot of painter, musician, dancers. So um, there they collaborate with with one of the dancers uh nearby so then produce now known as the monkey chant or kecak. It began with uh smaller group maybe thirty people then it get bigger many of the kecak group now before with maybe 150 uh performers uh portrayed the epic the great epic of India so called the “Ramayana” or or different type of of a story or so can be a modern kecak my friend Pak Dibia who graduated also from UCLA create a many new kecak a contemporary kecak based on different story not all only the epic of Ramayana the ladder monkey army involved but a different, different, story, yes, so.

Michael Alvarado:

Yeah, thank you so much

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes, thank you.

Colin Gotschall:

Yeah, we're at 10:45 already so I think we'll probably just have time for one more if that's okay with you too professor?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes, please.

Colin Gotschall:

So yeah, for the last four times one ask, so in the documentary you mentioned you had a passion of reaching a million views with that specific project. And I'm just wondering what is the driving force behind your passion to reach so many people around the world with your music?

I Nyoman Wenten:

Yes, um, starting you know, when I was, I was young, always wanted to, to, perform not only in Bali but outside Bali and also, study different culture, not only Balinese style of music and dance and so I wanted to reach out and broaden my knowledge to a different type of a music. After I'm I was a member of the, the, presidential mission culture, I saw many different uh musical dance and different “problem” different region of Indonesia open my mind. Oh, wow music of Java music from Sumatra Kalimantan Papua New Guinea is so beautiful. I wanna also to learn and that's why I wanted to also bring up my, my, own culture in Balinese music and dance abroad. Exchange to be able to study also different, different, cultures introduce collaborate with them

when you know finally. I came to the US study at Cal Art. I study Indian music African music and as well I went up to UCLA the in the 1980s. I study UCLA's open my, my, mind so at the same time I wanted to reach out to bring my my own music and dance my own culture to different part of the world. This why my, my, obsession, how could I can reach so many people? Uh, so the gamelan not everyone know gamelan in general can be knowns to all over the world. This this my ambition. Yes, is a answer your question?

Colin Gotschall:

Yes, yes, definitely thank you, so much professor this has been just a wonderful interview and I think we all learned quite a lot.

I Nyoman Wenten:

Oh, I'm so grateful you know you will be able to meet and discuss of some of the music but even not technically are analyzing the peace but in general speaking we will learn from each other.

Colin Gotschall:

Thank you.

I Nyoman Wenten:

Thank you, thank you so much thank you so much and we will talk again soon

Colin Gotschall:

OK yeah hope to see you around campus yes thank you alright take care.